

## Appreciation of John's Life

### Introductory Thanks

First of all, a disclaimer: What I am about to read is a joint effort of the family. So, blame me for its faults and thank the rest of the family for its good points, but above all may God have the glory. John had a busy life so sit back and enjoy!

I want to start by saying on behalf of Libby, Jo, Tim and the rest of the family how much we have appreciated the many cards and letters we have received. Libby particularly thanks all those who have corresponded with her in this way expressing messages of comfort and support. This was shown throughout John's illness and has continued since he passed into glory. Particular thanks to those who gave up their time to visit John and being willing to sit overnight with him during the last week of his life here on earth. Jo, Tim and Ruth were taking in turns to do overnight sitting by John's bedside. It was such a great help and blessing when friends also offered help in this way. We know John appreciated it very much too.

Of course, an appreciation of John's life would be incomplete without a bit of alliteration: So as per John's style of preaching we have five points all beginning with C:

1. Childhood
2. Change of Circumstance and Conversion
3. Calvinism and Constitutionals
4. Committees and Christian Fellowship
5. Contentment

### 1. Childhood

John Richard Smith was born at Little Wenham near Ipswich, 23<sup>rd</sup> August 1945 as the Second World War was ending. He was born at home the first child of Lionel and Mary Smith. In his infancy, he suffered an episode of bronchitis and whilst still a toddler experienced whooping cough. These were two serious childhood diseases of the time, being pre-National Health Service. However, God spared his life and he recovered well. His parents Lionel and Mary each came to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ October 1947 and April 1948 respectively. Therefore, John was blessed with godly parents from an early age who taught him to fear the Lord. After moving to Hintlesham, and an area called the Covey, John started at Hintlesham Primary School September 1950 in the same school as his father and his family before him had attended. In 1951, the family moved to Freston, John's father Lionel acquired employment with a family of large land owners. John's schooling continued at Freston Primary School until the age of 11 when his life changed forever! To quote John himself when he spoke here at his Father's thanksgiving service: "After 11 years of the bliss of being an only child I suddenly discovered I had a sister. Enough said as this is covered by the Official Secrets Act". In September 1956 John started at Holbrook Modern School. At this time, he had something of a lisp and was teased mercilessly by elder children as he had difficulty pronouncing his own name. He was determined to overcome this and did so by spending much time in self-correction. In the summer of 1960 John left school. The following four years were spent in various office jobs. By 1964, he had started work at Eastern Electricity in Wherstead near Ipswich. Here he was to remain for the rest of his working life. He started in the stationery department and moved through to purchasing where he became a buyer for the company. The skills acquired in his professional life

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remained with him and had a universal application. The friends here in Stowmarket Baptist will be familiar with his late-night sorties to Asda to take advantage of the price reductions, indeed he introduced some of you to these practices, **you know who you are!**

### 2. Change of Circumstance and Conversion

In 1965, John met a young lady from Hadleigh who caught his eye at the Sports and Social Club Dance put on by Libby's work. By the end of the evening they had made arrangements to meet again. Despite this secular setting, by God's grace, this young lady had a Christian mother, had been brought up and attended the Baptist Chapel in Hadleigh. At that same time, John was attending People's Hall Methodist Church in Ipswich. He was much involved in the Boys Brigade serving as an officer there. However, the main Christian influence in his life came from bible believing parents, who spoke freely of the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ throughout everyday life. It was quite commonplace to sit discussing the return of Christ and the end of the world over the lunch table. Therefore, John became aware of the biblical reality of sin and salvation at an early age. He had made a profession of faith around 18 years old, but in later years claimed that he was half-hearted, quite worldly and generally all over the shop spiritually speaking. From 1965-1969, during their time of courtship both John and Libby spiritually helped each other as the Lord worked in both of their lives. On Sundays John with Libby would attend Hadleigh Baptist Chapel sitting under the ministry of Pastor Donovan Rowland. To quote John again: "This was the time the Lord really sorted me out." <pause> During the preaching, he would sit with his bible open taking down notes as he had not heard preaching like it before. He was still attending People's Hall Methodist Church, involved in Boys Brigade and had started preaching on the Methodist circuit of churches, in and around Ipswich as well as some other non-conformist churches. He would claim in later years that the main thrust in his preaching at that time would be to expose the errors of Liberalism and promote the authority of the Bible as the Word of God. On the 28<sup>th</sup> June 1969, John and Libby were married at Hadleigh Baptist Chapel, three months later they were both baptised there by Pastor Rowland. They had moved to Stowmarket and in 1970 became members of the church here. Through the 1970s their children Jo and Tim were born. However, prior to their arrivals John and Libby's niece Cindy was born. They declined the invitation to be her godparents due to their biblical beliefs regarding baptism. They did however promise that they would be there to help Cindy if she needed it. That promise was brought to fruition in later years when due to changes in her family circumstances, Cindy came over from Jersey to live with John, Libby, Jo and Tim in Stowmarket. John freely and without hesitation supported Libby in welcoming Cindy into their family. She lived with them for 10 years and during this time it was a joy to see her come to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. John was a wonderful father to his children and taught them that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. Years later he was delighted to become a Grandad to Eleanor and Thomas. Both John and Libby spent time in babysitting and childcare when the children were small. As they grew up, many days out together were enjoyed. A fish and chip shop was usually involved somewhere in the day out! These precious times together with Eleanor and Tom included teaching them from God's word. John had the privilege of seeing them both come to faith in Christ in recent years. Last year, November 13<sup>th</sup> it was a great joy and blessing for John and the rest of the family to witness Tom being baptised.

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During the 1970s, John served in the church in Stowmarket, he participated in preaching ministry, also for a while served on the diaconate as Church Secretary and Leader of Senior FOY. In this latter role, he was a real encourager and spiritual influence for good to the young people. It was well known that if anyone had a question regarding Christian things, John Smith was the person to ask. Some of the friends present here today may well be some of those very same young people. The church underwent a period of difficulty at this time. For personal reasons, John left for a while and attended another church. However, when Nigel Lacey became Pastor in the late 1970s John returned to the fellowship here. He benefited greatly from the biblical, expository, applicatory ministry of this servant of God. He attended the monthly Suffolk Preachers Seminary which was held here at Stowmarket. This was an endeavour started by Nigel Lacey and other pastors with him gave lectures. This enabled itinerant preachers such as John to participate in training which could not be otherwise acquired whilst in full time secular employment.

### 3. Calvinism and Constitutionals

From the time of sitting under Don Rowland's ministry at Hadleigh, John grew in his understanding of the Bible. This resulted in an enthusiastic embracing of gospel truth, reflected in that body of doctrine known as Calvinism. He rejoiced in the greatness of God's free and sovereign grace to sinners such as himself. He loved these truths as they put God on the throne where He belongs, exalt the Lord Jesus Christ and humble man. These truths greatly influenced his preaching ministry. He had a hunger and thirst for an ever-deepening understanding of God's Word and his attention to detail is well remembered. John was very articulate, loved words and like the Puritans of old, would never use six or 16 words when 60 or 600 would do! His preaching ministry expanded throughout East Anglia and other parts of the country, including Cradley Heath where Pastor Burrows is now in ministry, Tavistock in Devon and Hailsham, Sussex. Over many years annual August trips to Hailsham for preaching purposes were incorporated into a holiday for Libby and him. They stayed with their good friend Evelyn Saunders, enjoying her fellowship and warm hospitality and are happy she is with us today. The weekdays in between his preaching would include walks in the countryside, a much-loved pastime of John. It is good that Evelyn can be with us today.

Over the years, he undertook various long walks in various locations, such as Helvellyn via striding edge and Sca Fell Pike which he did with a group of Christians including me. He and Libby spent a month in New Zealand in 1995. There they embarked on the Routeburn Track in the South Island. This is a guided walk over 5 days staying in tramping huts overnight. This was followed up a few years later by the coast to coast walk with his good friend Rupert Pyett. Then they did the West Highland way using a Sherpa service to transport their luggage ahead of them. The Herriot Way and finally a few years ago part of Offas Dyke. John loved these activities, particularly appreciating the opportunity afforded of fellowship with fellow believers and former colleagues from Wherstead. In this respect, he was happy walking around Suffolk. It must be noted however that despite several attempts, he never succeeded in climbing the Yorkshire three peaks, Pen-y-Ghent, Whernside and Ingleborough in a single walk within the allotted 12 hours. He accomplished two out of the three getting near the summit of the third before having to turn back due to running out of time. So, he

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never became a member of three peaks club unlike his friend Rupert. Another opportunity for fellowshiping with Christian friends was attending cricket matches.

### 4. Committees and Christian Fellowship

By God's providence John was able to retire at 50 from Eastern Electricity as part of a voluntary redundancy scheme. So, he had 21 years when in addition to enjoying a time of leisure was actively involved in serving the Lord and his people on committees with various Christian Organisations. His family in recent months discovered he had been involved in more than they previously were aware of. Three main ones come to mind:

1. Association of Grace Baptist Churches East Anglia, where he served over many years as Minute Secretary with an involvement in the annual tent meetings.
2. Sovereign Grace Union where he served as Treasurer on the East Anglian auxiliary.
3. Probably most well known in later years was his work for Pilgrim Homes particularly in relation to Finborough Court. He served as secretary for the East Anglian Auxiliary. Tirelessly preparing, publicising and attending forthcoming meetings at Finborough Court. Posters were hand delivered in used envelopes to save administrative costs. Ruth would be given several such addressed envelopes to deliver to various parts of Colchester. Once she arrived back home, stamps would be applied to such packages and posted out. On hearing this, John would just reply, that is fine it is your money on the postage not Pilgrim Homes!

John also took it upon himself to start an egg ministry. He ended up with a little business of buying eggs in bulk and then doing a sale and delivery service to friends in Stowmarket, which afforded an opportunity to chat with them and enjoy Christian fellowship.

In 2013 and 2015, John and Libby came with Ruth and myself to the Spanish Experience spending a week's holiday in rural central southern Spain. The region is Castilla La Mancha where the Spanish Gospel Mission with which I am closely involved, operates. It was a great opportunity to visit the small evangelical churches supported by SGM. We stayed at the mission centre in Valdapenas. John's enjoyment of the week was expressed in the article he wrote for the SGM Magazine "Spotlight on Spain". On the Sunday evening singing from an old style "Sankey" hymnbook in Spanish at the church at Santa Cruz de Mudela, we identified the well-known hymns by their tunes. In the article, John said: "It was while singing the hymn "In Tenderness he sought me", I felt overcome by a wave of emotion (I trust not emotionalism!) that here was a group of my spiritual brothers and sisters of an entirely different lingo and culture, yet who had the experiential knowledge of the same love that sought us, blood that bought us and grace that brought us to the fold. I could not help but wonder what it will be like in the eternal glory when voices from every kindred tongue, people and nation will unite to sing the praise and worth of the Lamb". Well John is now experiencing it.

### 5. Contentment

It was only seven months ago that John stood up in the pulpit here giving an appreciation of his father Lionel's life following his passing into glory. He mentioned then that the word of God states there is a time to be born and a time to die. Indeed, John's life had nearly ended 24 years earlier in the early 1990's. He was involved in a road accident while riding his

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moped. It occurred at a T junction and he was turning right, a lorry was coming in the opposite direction and he did not see it until it was too late. He threw himself in the opposite direction and later testified that he felt it was as if he was being lifted out of danger. The moped was crushed under the lorry, the poor driver expected to see the rider likewise lying crushed under the lorry. He was amazed to see John shook up but standing up and talking without a scratch. John was heard to comment afterward that any lifespan following this would be a bonus. The Lord granted him another 24 years. During November, last year he began to be unwell. He underwent various tests eventually receiving a diagnosis of pancreatic cancer on 6<sup>th</sup> February this year. All throughout this time, John's peace of heart and mind was clearly evident. He said "I have preached the absolute sovereignty of God throughout the last 50 years, I have done it very dogmatically. Now I have got to live by it and if the Lord so wills I go to glory by it." Never once did he complain about his situation or question God's plans and purposes. He believed in his heart "Will not the judge of all the earth do right?" He spent several weeks in West Suffolk Hospital during which time he appreciated the loving support of family and many Christian friends who visited. Folk came to encourage John and went away blessed and encouraged themselves. His time in hospital and for the last 12 days in Cedrus House, Stowmarket, were full of testimony to the staff. Indeed, at Cedrus House, he received wonderful care from devoted staff. They were impressed by this man who was clearly dying, telling them that he had a wonderful future ahead of him. He was going to heaven to be with his Saviour. He requested passages of scripture to be read along with hymns from Gospel Hymns Hymn Book, that spoke of heaven and the anticipation of it. Why was John so amazing in his attitude in this situation? Quite simply it was the grace of God. That which had saved him years before was preserving him right up to the point of his departure to be with His Lord. Indeed, he looked forward with eager anticipation to heaven. During John's illness, there was a phenomenal amount of prayer being offered up for him, from right across the churches. For this we as a family give you our sincere thanks. We indeed longed for the Lord to intervene and raise him up back to health. But His ways are higher than our ways and His thoughts above our thoughts. He knows best. Prayers were wonderfully answered in that John was mightily held up by God's grace protecting him from the onslaughts of Satan on his soul which cause doubt and fear. We were reminded much of the words in Toplady's hymn: "And walls of salvation surround the soul he delights to defend." These truths were much evidenced during these difficult days. The Lord finally called John home into his presence during the afternoon of the 21<sup>st</sup> March. What can we say other than what John himself would say from the words of Job 1:21 "The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord."